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VITALIZING MYTHOLOGY

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While teaching mythology and striving to interest the student in this subject with new methods of approach, the writer became possessed of an idea which it is hoped may be found helpful to other teachers in the way of supplementing textbook material. If mythology is not a study of vital importance to the undergraduate, it certainly is an interesting one, while as a sidelight to history, art, and literature it deserves his attention on account of its cultural value. The plan proposed aims at providing the teacher with a real working medium, so that, apart from gaining a book knowledge of the subject, the student may find in the course something stimulating and of real practical value. The scheme may be elaborated according to the time given to the course and at the judgment of the teacher. For a general survey of Greek and Roman mythology one hour a week is fairly satisfactory. A course in comparative mythology would enrich the field but would demand more time.

Most of us have been brought up on Bulfinch's *Age of Fable*, Hawthorne's *Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales*, and other collections of classic myths. We never outgrow the fairylike appeal of these stories. In childhood they amuse us, but to the mature student this mass of detail loses interest for itself alone. As he transfers his childish interest to the more scientific aspect of the subject, it soon acquires new meaning as the basis of an interesting study, full of the principles of life, clothing social and political relations, veiling scientific, religious, and philosophic thought, all set forth in that fascinating imagery through which the Greeks gave expression to their thoughts. A realization of this fact, namely, that every myth has some idea behind it comes as a surprise to most students, and a still greater one comes with the suggestion that there are still possibilities in adapting these myths, that mythology may be vitalized in such a way as to yield practical results.

The teacher of course duly appreciates the principal reasons for studying mythology. These may or may not be anticipated by the student, but it is likely that he faintly apprehends the relation of Greek mythology to history, art, and literature, as well as to the lives and minds of those who made it what it is. A thorough study of these relations will not be minimized by the teacher, since stress has been laid on these features by up-to-date texts. With the lantern and screen equipment the student will enjoy another advantage, that of becoming familiar with the gods and goddesses as portrayed by ancient and modern sculptors and artists. A lasting impression of pose and attribute is made by interspersing lecture and recitation with such illustrations.

No one denies the fact that the study of mythology quickens the artistic sense and judgment and increases the appreciation of art and literature. Both art and literature take on a deeper meaning when revealed through mythology. But the demands for today's studies are for practicality. Can we show that this study is not a purely negative one and meet the demand for practical results? Surely mythology can do its bit in equipping the student for his life-work. Even the reporter needs to know a little mythology now and then in order to liven up the daily locals and vary his own platitudes.

The vital things in mythology are the thoughts behind it. Until we come to a full realization of this we fail to appreciate mythology as an expression of the Greek mind; and not until we do reach this viewpoint will we be able to vitalize mythology and connect it with the forces of our own lives. One writer says: "Greek and Roman mythology are unfailing in their vitality; their mythology is plastic and capable of varying its quality, is susceptible of employment for various uses."

This suggested the idea which was tried out with fairly interesting and satisfactory results, and it is hoped that this scheme will prove sufficiently practical and valuable to become a permanent feature of classroom work with additions as the time will allow and experience may suggest. It was proposed to *vitalize* mythology in some such way: First, having selected a myth for study, assimilate all the details, look under the surface for its meaning, look at

it from every angle, consider the characters and their inherent qualities and attributes. Then, use the imagination. With all the details in the subconsciousness let the student try to connect what he has read with some phase of life or with some local tradition, and let him strive to recast the myth. This will seem an impossibility at first, but with a little thought and encouragement attempts will be made and carried out with interest. Many times the results will be crude from lack of imagination, inability of expression, or from ignorance of technique. Even so the trial will be worth while. Careful emphasis must continually be laid on the thoughts which are the vital element of the myth and on the necessity of appreciating the part which this vivifying quality must play in original expression and adaptation of material.

What subjects shall be selected for such constructive work? They may be varied as time permits. Something in literature or local traditions may suggest an idea for the student to follow up. Each myth will open up varied possibilities to one who is on the lookout. A few of the titles tried out in class may be mentioned: "A Trip to Hades," "The Thirteenth Labor of Heracles," "The Pioneer in Iowa." The themes were read and criticized in class. Action was supposed to be in harmony with the character represented; epithet and phrase were urged in accordance with classic usage. For instance, if Athena was introduced, she was not to be described as "black-eyed"; if Ares was mentioned, it was pointed out that due consideration must be shown for that quality of war which he represented, war cruel and barbarous in direct contrast to the wisdom and skill of Athena in war. The grasp of such basic ideas seems quite necessary for one who would make use of mythological material in a literary way.

The first subject familiarized the student with the geography of the lower world, the Greek conception of life after death, also with various deities and personages on both sides the Styx. The most popular subject was the second. Almost with one accord Heracles was figured as the benefactor of mankind in ridding Europe of despotism and plunging its rank offender into Tartarus. Athletically inclined students made this son of Zeus patron of football on the local gridiron. "The Pioneer in Iowa" was intended to

suggest a variant of the Demeter myth through local conditions and tradition, the parallel of social life dependent on agriculture. This myth is one of the most fruitful and stimulating, fresh with life, heavy with mystery, full of mother-love and yearning. In its many aspects it lends itself well to adaptation and repays thoughtful study.

One may vary the themes by proposing subjects for drawings and asking those who have talent in this line to bring in pencil or pen-and-ink sketches. A brief description of two sketches furnished by students in the course will serve to show how the material of the Demeter myth was treated to bring out the idea of the rise of agriculture in Iowa. In one medallion the figures are grouped on the right and their names printed on the margin—Persephone, Demeter, and Triptolemus—in order, from background to foreground. Triptolemus has his left hand on the plow; Demeter holds in her extended right hand ears of corn as she points to the west; Persephone shares in the joy of giving with a shower of spring flowers which she flings to the four winds. Opposite this group, on the left, are gently undulating prairies and tepees. On the margin near by is lettered "Iowa." The whole symbolizes the progress of civilization from east to west. Another drawing on the same subject shows Demeter as central figure, knee-deep in the corn fields. Her hands are extended, and the shocks of corn, the heaps of vegetables piled about her, the branches of fruit-laden trees swaying above her, all testify to her bounteous generosity. In the distant background can be seen the ever-present windmill and barn gable.

Examples might be multiplied, but enough has been said to outline the process for vitalizing mythology. No unique contributions to art or literature are expected from young students. If these suggestions pave the way for something original in the future, if the results prove that mythology is by no means a dead subject, and that it can be studied in a way to meet the crying demand for practicality, then the end is attained and the scheme becomes fixed as a "method."